



Is My Child Overtired?

Raise your hand if you've had the experience of seeing your older baby or toddler be quite content in the evening, playing around, but clearly getting a bit more tired than usual when suddenly she's hyper and running around everywhere. You think she's suddenly gotten to an overtired stage so you try to get her to sleep or calm down at the very least to be met with resistance and failure, over and over.

Sound familiar?

For many families, this is an all-too-common reality. In a culture where "overtired" is a term that is thrown about whenever a child resists sleep, it's no wonder it's the go-to for families who can't quite figure out why bedtimes seem so difficult, but it's not actually always the case. In fact, I would argue that most of the time it's not the case at all.

If your child isn't overtired, what's happening?

Let's start by talking about what happens before sleep for a child (and adults). Over the course of being awake, our sleep pressure builds up. As the sleep pressure builds, our circadian alerting system works to keep us awake. At nighttime, if the sleep pressure is strong enough, we see the signs of a tired child, but right before it shuts down for the evening, the circadian alerting system has one last push. This last push is often a very strong one because it's countering the very strong sleep pressure.

It is this push that often leads to our children becoming - shall we say? - hyper. As such, there is little you can or even want to do to calm them down. The only thing to do is let them get that energy out so they can fall asleep afterwards. It's worth noting that even us adults have this period, but we are better able to handle the surge that comes with this alert so that we may not be able to fall asleep, but we don't run around like maniacs. (For most adults, the period between 8 and 9pm represents this time and it is nearly impossible to fall asleep. But of course there is huge variability and it will depend on other factors.)

A few things to remember though:

1. This period lasts about an hour, but will be variable to your child. Of course, the energy decreases over that time.
2. Although your child has a lot of energy to get out, it doesn't mean that you want to keep that energy level up. Parents often end up contributing by engaging at the same energy level which artificially keeps them amped up. I always recommend keeping your energy level about 2 notches (out of 10) lower than your child's which means you'll slowly be modeling the wind down time *if you are playing with them during this time.*

3. It's okay to let your child just get the energy out as he or she sees fit. If they are happy climbing and playing around, you don't need to be involved. If they want you, of course you can and should engage, but don't feel this is a must.

4. You still need to keep the environment dim or else lights can negatively impact your child's ability to fall asleep independent of this period.

5. Aim to get your child to bed when you see the energy expended. This is the "ideal" time for sleep from a biological perspective.

Now, what about when a child really is overtired? How do you tell the difference?

The reality is that the same system is at work when our children get overtired so it can seem difficult to tell the difference between this pre-sleep energy and a child who is overtired. You see, if our kids miss their sleep window (which isn't as narrow as some would suggest, but that's a topic for another day), the circadian alerting system comes back on to provide energy as it realizes sleep isn't happening. So again, you still need to "ride it out", but it's not quite as fun.

To differentiate between the two, I suggest the simple question: Is your child happy? You see, in that first pre-sleep energy, children are often quite happy and content as they play. They may be running around and a bit manic, but they don't get frustrated or annoyed by small mistakes or things not going perfectly. In contrast, when they are overtired, they tend to oscillate between being hyper and happy and melting down. A child who is getting angry and throwing toys out of frustration is in the overtired zone and although you may need to ride it out to let that energy expend, be aware of when it starts to decrease so you can jump on sleep time for everyone.

Of course there are also individual variations between children so don't panic if your kid is different. The key is to always pay attention to their cues, but knowing that hyper doesn't always equal overtired will hopefully help some of you avoid bedtime resistance and have a more relaxed time at night.

Tracy Cassels, PhD is the Director of Evolutionary Parenting, a science-based, attachment-oriented resource for families on a variety of parenting issues. In addition to her online resources, she offers one-on-one support to families around the world and is regularly asked to speak on a variety of issues from sleep to tantrums at conferences and in the media. She lives in Prince Edward County, Ontario, Canada with her husband and two children.